

Take Time to Honor Teachers (May 8, 2006)

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May 7-13 is Teacher Appreciation Week

This week is the 21st annual Teacher Appreciation Week, and Tuesday, May 9th is National Teacher Day. This is a time for all Southwest Virginians to honor the region's teachers and recognize them with the praise they have earned and deserve. Teachers play a vital role in the education process of our children, and it is especially important that these individuals be recognized appropriately for their contributions and hard work.

The retention of qualified and experienced teachers is necessary to ensure that all students develop the knowledge base that will allow them to succeed in their chosen careers. The children of Southwest Virginia are the key to our future and in addition to providing the best schools and educational materials, we must also ensure that they are able to learn from the best teachers.

As a member of Congress, I am continually looking for ways to provide support for those individuals who choose teaching as their profession. Of particular importance, is providing incentives to encourage newly certified teachers to settle in rural areas like Southwest Virginia. To help address this matter, I have co-authored the Teacher Tax Credit Act of 2005, H.R. 986. This measure provides tax credits to teachers and principals who work in rural or low-income schools, and if enacted, it will encourage more teachers to settle in rural school districts by providing financial incentives to do so.

Another vital piece of legislation which will help address teacher shortages by providing the necessary incentives for more college graduates to choose teaching as a profession is the Teach for America Act, of which I am a coauthor. Teach for America is a program that recruits and trains recent college graduates to become educators. The program has enjoyed considerable success since its inception in 1990, during which time it has employed more than 14,000 teachers in rural and urban communities across the country. The legislation that I am working to enact would further enhance this successful program by authorizing the Secretary of Education to award grants to Teach For America to implement and expand its program of recruiting, selecting, training, and supporting new teachers.

I am also a coauthor of the Teacher Tax Relief Act of 2005 legislation which will raise the reimbursement rate for teachers who use their own money to purchase school supplies for their classrooms and students. Teachers spend on average more than \$1,000 per year on essential learning materials such as pencils, books, and lesson plans, and it is necessary that teachers be adequately compensated for these generous efforts.

I also recognize the unique challenges that teachers in Southwest Virginia face. Today, wealthier school districts, located chiefly in Northern Virginia and Tidewater, spend more per pupil more than the less wealthy school districts in rural areas of the state are able to spend. The result of this disparity is that school divisions in rural areas have fewer curricular offerings, less state-of-the-art technology, more poorly equipped labs and a higher student/teacher ratio than school districts in other parts of the state.

Full implementation of a fiber optic network linking all Southwest Virginia high schools, community colleges and four-year colleges in our region is one way to begin to address this concern. Fiber optic networks provide students with distance learning opportunities and increase students' access to regional, national, and global information sources by means of the Internet. These opportunities will make the learning experience more interesting for students in Southwest Virginia and will enable them to fully participate in the information age.

As we celebrate Teacher Appreciation Week, let us take the time to recognize those teachers in our communities who have prepared us for our chosen careers and those who are dedicated to ensuring that future generations of Southwest Virginians receive quality instruction and guidance.

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